

Chapter 21

The Living is Easy

Summertime was pretty good, too. Once we were released from the obligations of school, each summer day seemed timeless and everlasting. When the temperature soared over ninety degrees, we'd run through the sprinkler, buy a Popsicle from the Good Humor ice cream truck, or watch the Pepke kids swim in their above ground swimming pool. There weren't many swimming pools in Morris Heights; the Pepkes had the only one on our street. During one torrid stretch, I actually tried being friendly with Debbie Pepke. I even went over her house a few times but the only thing she wanted to do was play school, and I just escaped from that situation. Even the cool, Pepke pool wasn't enough to get me to be a prisoner in Debbie Pepke's imaginary classroom. "Don't you want to play math class?" she asked me as I grabbed my baseball glove, jumped on my bike and headed for the safety of the baseball field.

We spent mornings at Robinson Field or Muncie Park where we'd play game after game of pick-up baseball or homerun derby or rollee-pollee. In rollee-pollee the batter would toss up a baseball and hit it into the outfield. The fielders would push each other and streak to and scramble for the ball. Rollee-pollee was part baseball and part roller derby. Whoever caught the ball or fielded it or yanked it from the others would roll the ball back to the batter who had placed the bat on the ground. If the rolling ball struck the bat, there'd be a new hitter. The roller would become the poller. We would play all morning. Only hunger could drive us from the field, and after a lunch of, say, fried bologna on Nouveau Monde white bread and a guzzled glass of cherry kool-aid, we'd be back at the field for the afternoon.

On game days for The Gas, the afternoon session would be short or even cancelled. Coach Mitchell actually asked his players to take it easy during game day afternoons. He even wanted them to take naps. On those days, I would jump rope with Muriel White. Muriel White competed in jump rope competitions throughout New England. Her bedroom was filled with ribbons and trophies and broken jump ropes. She was a year older than me and she went to boarding school in Connecticut. Muriel had amazing muscled in her legs. I convinced her to try playing in our pick-up baseball games. One time Speed Miller said to her, "You throw a baseball like a girl."

"Oh, yeah," Muriel said back. "You jump rope like a boy." Muriel White was the only girl besides me to ever take part in the Morris Heights pick-up baseball games. It was really nice having another girl playing ball but Muriel stopped playing after a week. I asked her why.

"When they'd choose teams," she said. "I'd always get picked last. Last. Can you believe it? After Stephen Dunn, after Duane Bennett, even after Joey Mitchell's brother Timmy." Timmy was 4 1/2, but you could already tell that he was going to be good.

Some days we couldn't decide just what to do. "Do you want to play wiffle ball?" Joey Mitchell would ask.

"Nah," the rest of us would answer.

"Do you want to read comic books?"

"Nah."

"How about we build a fort in the woods?"

"Nah."

"I know; let's go fishing at the reservoir."

"Nah."

"You want to listen to the radio?"

"Nah."

"Do you want to throw rocks into the Pepke's pool?"

On the sweet days when we played ball all day, we'd keep track of our stats. "I was 16 for 27," a tired Ray Flanagan might say. "I had five doubles, two triples and a homerun. I got eleven RBIs and I scored fourteen runs. I had a good day."

After dinner we'd go to Muncie Park to watch a Pee Wee league game or to Robinson Field for a Mighty Midget league contest. We'd catch frogs in the swamp and get a soda at Glickman's Drug Store. When it got dark, we'd play chase in the neighborhood. Chase was our variation of hide and go seek. It seemed like every home in Morris Heights was filled with kids our age and so our

chase games were always loaded with twenty or thirty of those kids. Every back yard except the Hillpepper's was in bounds for chase.

One night at the end of a day filled with baseball and Popsicles and comic books and chase, Joey Mitchell and I stretched out on the grass in my back yard and looked at the full, yellow moon. It seemed like I could touch it if I were just a little taller.

"You think it'll always be like this, Eileen?" Joey said.

"No way," I said. "Each night it'll get a little less full."

"Not the moon. Everything else. My dad says we should bottle it up, this age we are now. That we shouldn't think it'll always be, I don't know, be this good."

I didn't answer him. I was watching a shooting star. But, of course, Joey Mitchell's dad was right.